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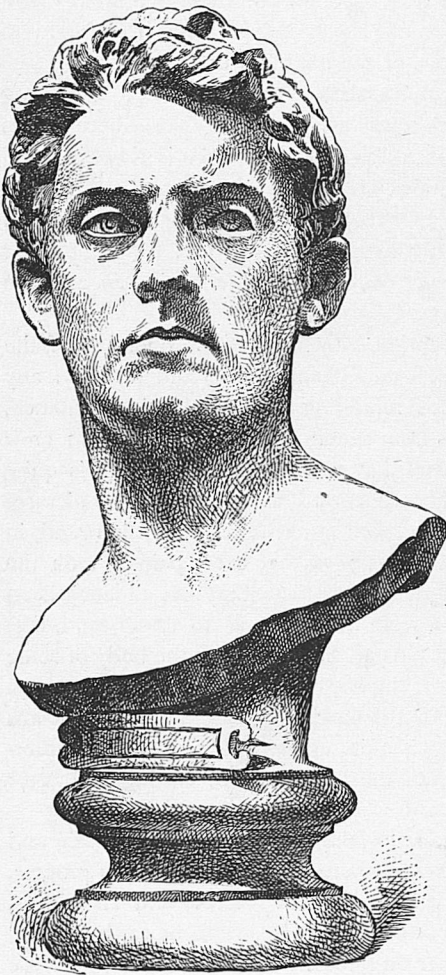
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THE EXHIBITIONS.

IV.—SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARTISTS.

THIRD EXHIBITION.¹

(OPENED MARCH 17. CLOSED APRIL 16.)



BUST OF J. ALDEN WEIR.

BY WARNER.

NOT very long ago it was the common talk in the art circles of New York and Boston that the newly imported methods of the Paris and Munich students were destined to only a brief existence in America. Their influence, it was said, would soon die out, and legitimate art, as it was called, would live it down. The complaints and the discontent of the would-be reformers seemed to give some color to these opinions. Educated in the capitals of Europe, where art influences are dominant, and where they were surrounded by pictorial effects which seized upon their imagination to such a degree as almost to efface the love of their own country, these enthusiastic students considered life here an exile, and longed to return to a more congenial atmosphere. They railed at the paucity of our art treasures, the æsthetic barrenness of our people, and the unartistic effects of our scenery.

When, under such unfavorable circumstances, a number of these students associated in a society boldly declared to be a rival to the National Academy of Design, the experiment was felt—even by its friends—to be daring and hazardous. The first exhibition of the new society, although it showed a number of successful and important works, was hardly considered a full test of the vitality of the organization, because most of the contributions had been painted abroad, and therefore gave little idea of the extent of the reserve force of the exhibitors when thrown on their own resources. The second exhibition showed such a falling off in quality that the confidence of the public was shaken. The large number of mere studies included seemed to indicate either that the artists had reached the limit of their original force, or that their interest in the new enterprise had begun to flag. The members themselves became conscious that a vigorous effort must be made to reverse this unfavorable judgment. The result is seen in the Third Exhibition of the Society of American Artists, which was opened to the public on the 17th of March.

The first circumstance that strikes one on looking around the hall is the very notable absence of the works of some of the most important contributors to the previous exhibitions. Inness *père*, Samuel Colman, Bridgeman, Duveneck, Minor, Miss Cassatt, Millet, Currier, and Moran are conspicuous by their absence. Another feature of the collection is its average excellence. Smaller than the last one,—the catalogue enumerates only one hundred and sixty-two works, to which number must be added a few pictures not catalogued,—the present Exhibition is less burdened with rubbish. The Society seems to have better understood the importance of public opinion and the rare opportunity afforded to it of shaping popular taste, provided it can prove its worthiness for such a high purpose. A third distinguishing characteristic, which is sure to arouse comment, although not likely to be adopted elsewhere at once, is the practical abolition of the traditional line, or of places of honor for special paintings. The hanging committee decided to place the pictures

¹ Several of the illustrations intended for this article having been delayed, they will be given in a subsequent number.

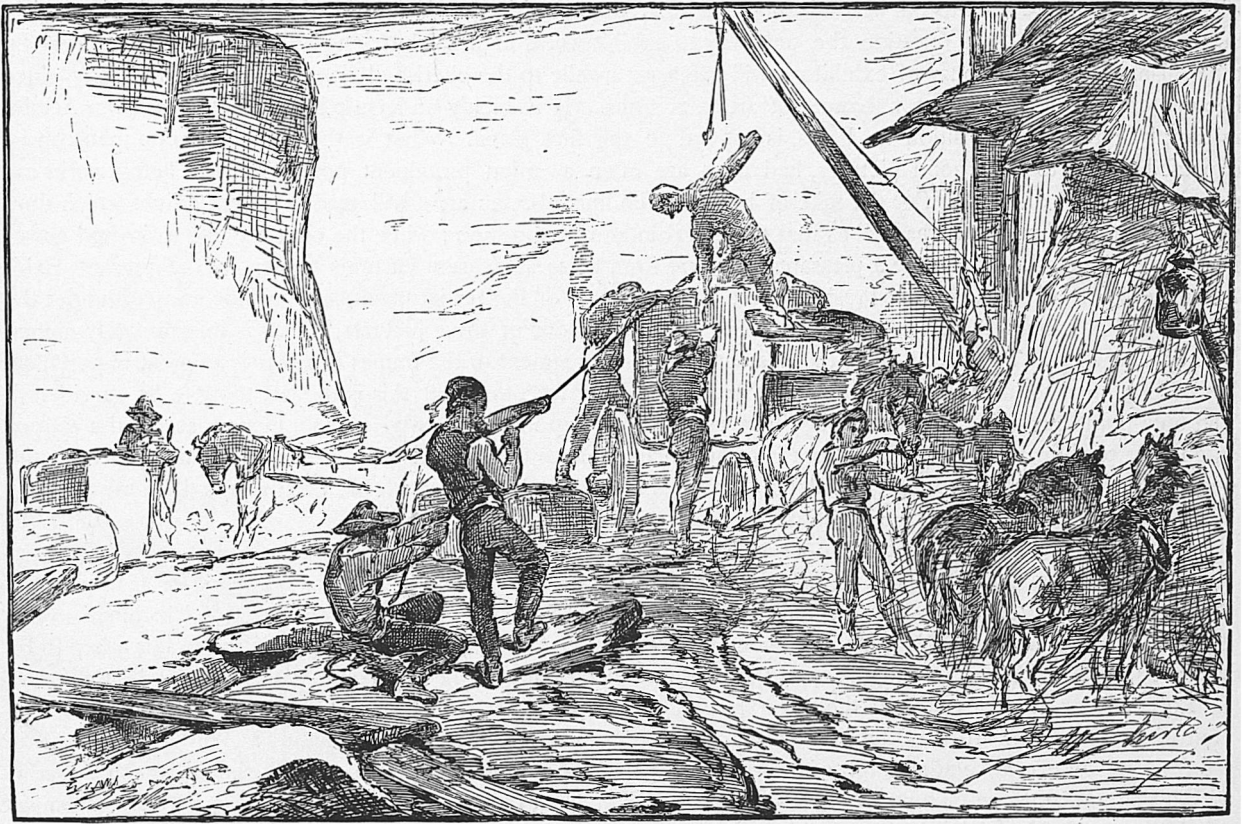
where they would be seen to the best advantage, and at the same time not interfere with the rights of other paintings. This is beyond all question the only way to exhibit works of art. But long-established custom, aided by the selfishness or the jealousy of exhibitors, will cling yet awhile to the cherished line, although it has long since become one of the prominent nuisances of art exhibitions. It is tacitly understood, for example, that an Academician, by right of the position he holds, is entitled to the first place. What is the result? As no man can be expected always to paint good pictures, bad ones are often awarded prominent positions, while better works are skyed almost out of sight. For the sake of being on the line, also, an artist will readily accept a light which does not perhaps suit his picture as well as that to be had in another position; while the courtesy due to invited guests is apt to be ignored. It is quite a pleasant departure from these unpleasant customs to see, in the present Exhibition, some of the works of the President and Vice-President of the Society hang side by side away up under the ceiling, and one might almost suspect a sly joke in the title of one of these pictures, which is appropriately named *Out of the Way*. The notion, also, that a symmetrical arrangement of the frames is a matter of great importance, has often tended to impair the appearance of pictures. It is forgotten that this is the last thing to be considered. The only point a hanging committee should be required to keep in view is to give each picture as good a chance as possible to show its merits. If a work is of sufficient value to be admitted, do it full justice, and then leave the decision as to its qualities to the general public. This is the novel policy which has been adopted by the hanging committee in the case under consideration.

The strength of the Exhibition, so far as quantity is concerned, is in its figure pieces; but it includes also several landscapes, which are not surpassed in excellence by anything in the gallery. We refer, for example, to a work entitled *April Clouds*, one of a number of canvases by Mr. Twachtman, a young artist of Cincinnati. The defect of the picture, which is apparent in all the works of this artist, is that it is pitched in too low a key to be wholly agreeable. Although, judging from the shadows, the scene must be supposed to be illumined by the broad light of mid-day, the effect is as if the sun were partially eclipsed. Is it necessary to affect the low tone so common with some of the artists of the Munich school in order to interpret the truths of nature? We think this tone is the result of an excessive admiration of the rich dark paintings of the Renaissance. But it should be remembered that, owing to age, these pictures are much darker now than when they were first painted. By parity of reasoning, one is almost afraid to think how excessively black and meaningless some of the paintings of to-day will look two centuries hence. For the rest, it can be honestly admitted that, in representing the values or relations of things, in composition, in exquisite suggestions of color, and in general artistic sentiment, this simple landscape by Mr. Twachtman is rich alike in promise and in achievement.

Mr. Charles H. Miller has a creditable, forcibly rendered *Old Mill*; but still better is a picture by the same artist, simply entitled *Landscape*. This is one of the best works of this faithful admirer of Constable, — more refined and subtle in its suggestions than most of his previous productions. The bold handling, while securing purity of color, and powerfully imitating the tumultuous gathering of masses of cloud, appears to us, however, to be somewhat exaggerated in strength. It is true that Dupré and Constable both aimed at securing similar effects in a similar manner; but before their pictures we somehow feel less that the sky overbalances the rest of the composition. In spite of its many excellent qualities, Mr. Wyant's landscape, fancifully called *Any Man's Land*, produces the same effect of disproportion between land and sky. The peculiar fluffiness and the variegated grays of clouds on a windy morning dragging their skirts over the solitary heath of a mountain side are marvellously rendered; and the same may be said regarding the broad, yet suggestive way in which the artist has treated the soil and herbage over which these clouds are trailing. But nevertheless we cannot avoid the consciousness that land and sky are scarcely mated in this picture.

Autumn Afternoon in Berkshire, a New England landscape by A. H. Thayer, is a poetic and delicate rendering of a phase of nature peculiar to the Northern States. Mr. Wyatt Eaton's *New Bridge at Manasquan River* merits commendation for purity of color, atmosphere, and forcible handling. An effective marine, *On the Flemish Banks*, by Harry Chase, of St. Louis, a pupil of Mesdag; a very fresh and charming woodland scene by McEwen; and the landscapes of such well-known artists as R. Swain Gifford, F. S. Church, W. P. Phelps, W. S. Macy, J. Foxcroft Cole, and George Inness, Jr., — all of them attractive and individual in style, — must be passed over without special comment.

One would think that Venice, its campaniles and decorated sails, had been painted to death. The fact that one may yet take an interest in scenes borrowed from this well-worn theme shows that art after all depends not so much upon the subject as upon the personality which a painter imparts to it. Seeing the subject from his own stand-point, each new-comer, if he be a true artist, extracts a new truth from it, and thus shows the inexhaustible richness of nature, — a richness only limited by the number of minds that know how to express their emotions in language of their own. We see this exemplified in the stately canvases of W. G. Bunce, a graduate of the ateliers of Munich and Paris. Having learned there how to look at nature, he has yet preserved his own vigorous individuality and self-assertion unimpaired; and in his Venetian scenes, steeped as they are in all the poetry of the



THE MARBLE QUARRY.

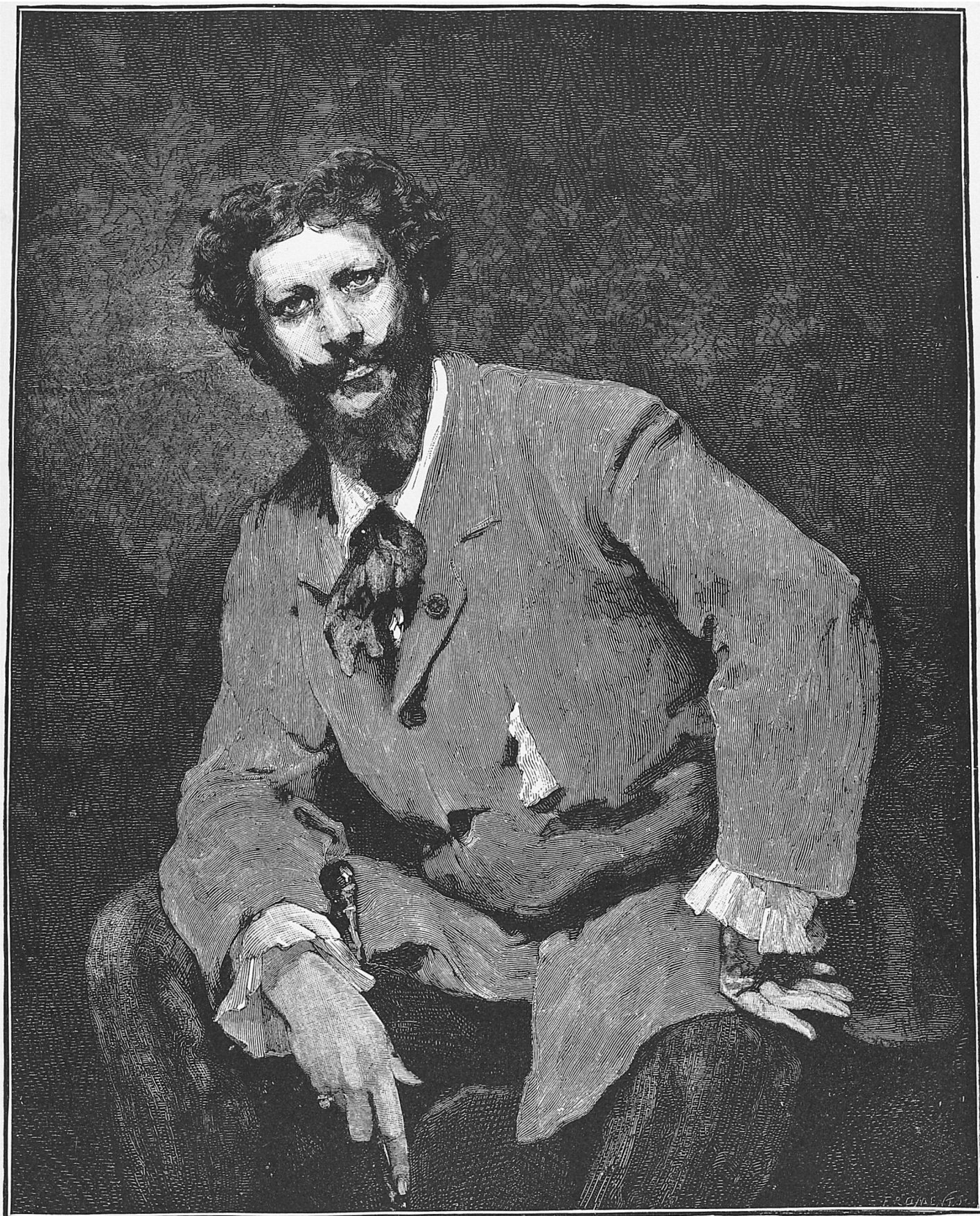
BY SHIRLAW. — FROM A SKETCH BY THE ARTIST.

region which inspired them, he shows that he has been powerfully influenced by the magic of the glorious Mediterranean. It is impossible for any reproduction to convey more than the faintest indication of the infinitely delicate suggestions of color, and the largeness of feeling and atmosphere, which characterize the painting called *Morning, Venice*. Mr. Bunce achieves his effects generally by the use of the knife in preference to the brush. There is no doubt that an artist who has confidence in himself can better interpret the luminousness of nature in this way than in any other.

Mr. Homer Martin has rarely been more successful in his peculiar effects of turquoise and gold than in the painting simply catalogued as *Sunset*. We see a lake shimmering in the quivering, hazy splendor of a sky radiant with the glory of departing day. The diffusion of light over the landscape fading away into the glowing distance is admirably rendered, while the forms are sketched with just sufficient indefiniteness to suggest the dreamy quietude of the hour.

The border line between landscape and genre is finely exemplified by Mr. Shirlaw's *Marble Quarry*. More than in any other recent effort of his, we find in this composition, although it is unfinished, an opportunity of comparing him with himself. The importance of the work suggests at once the sheep-shearing scene which he painted at Munich, and we are led to inquire whether his hand answers the bidding of his brain as well here as there. The interest of the *Marble Quarry* depends less on the subject than on the treatment. The scene is laid in Vermont, and Mr. Shirlaw has contrived to infuse into it all the warmth and variety of color of which it is capable, — the bay horses, the red and blue shirts of the workmen, and the gray and reddish iron veins in the rocks, combining to produce an effect which few people would imagine possible in such a subject in America. The light, also, is well managed, and the groups of figures are pleasingly composed. The only fault we are disposed to find with the picture is that in the action of some of the figures the violent exertion of the men, who are straining every sinew and muscle in the discharge of their arduous duty, has been somewhat lost in the strict adherence to the model as it posed before the artist in his studio. The horses, on the contrary, are admirably natural in their pose and action; and, when considered in connection with the success which Mr. Shirlaw has achieved with birds and animals in other pictures, would almost incline one to believe that he has been specially cut out for an animal painter.

Although it may be said that the landscapes, being less numerous, show a more uniform quality than the portraits and figure pieces, it is nevertheless the latter class of pictures which most prominently challenges attention



PORTRAIT OF CAROLUS DURAN.

BY JOHN S. SARGENT.

Salon, 1879. — Society of American Artists, 1881.

(Reproduced from "L'Illustration.")

and criticism. This is due partly to the preponderance in quantity and the importance of subject and treatment, but chiefly to the fact that in this direction the students in Paris and Munich have thrown the weight of their metal.

Among the numerous contributions of Mr. William M. Chase the *Portrait of Gen. James Watson Webb* is by far the most important for size, as well as for picturesqueness of subject and effective treatment. This artist has done nothing better since he left his studio in the old convent at Munich, and it would be difficult to find anything within the whole range of American art, since the time of Stuart, capable of outranking this masterly work, either in vividness of conception, luminousness of color, or broad and massive handling. As regards the last-named qualities the picture is well fitted to show how far they may be carried without overstepping the bounds of the permissible. The treatment of the left hand especially borders almost on the verge of impressionism; yet the result is admirable, because the limit, although reached, has been respected. Several other portraits by Mr. Chase merit more than the mere allusion we can make to them. But while they indicate that his talents have found a congenial field in this country, they also show that, like the late Mr. Hunt, he is still chiefly concerned with the technical part of his profession, especially color. Indeed, this may be said to be the prominent feature of the Exhibition. In the present transitional state of American art this is doubtless a favorable sign, but it should not be forgotten that it is not the highest art whose principal glory is technical success. The masters — Da Vinci, Velasquez, Rubens, Rembrandt, Turner, Millet — employ the material to express the ideal. Let us hope that the time will soon come when an American artist like Mr. Chase shall be able to find themes worthy of his powers.

The remarkable *Portrait of Carolus Duran*, by Mr. John S. Sargent, which has already attracted so much attention in Europe, is an admirable pendant to Mr. Chase's *General Webb*. The two pictures forcibly illustrate that in art also "many ways lead to Rome," or, in other words, that equally good results may be obtained by methods which seem to be opposed to each other. The rugged force of Mr. Chase's style is in Mr. Sargent's work replaced by a handling which, although bold, is yet delicate; warmth of color and glowing shadows, by an all-pervading silvery tone. In every particular Mr. Sargent's *Duran* is not only a grand rendering of a striking subject, but also as good an example as we can probably get of the present state of portraiture in France.

Among the many other portraits exhibited, those by George Fuller, J. Alden Weir, Douglas Volk, William E. Marshall, and Montague Flagg are especially noteworthy, although we hardly think that the peculiar qualities of Mr. Fuller's talents appear to such an advantage in this exhibition as at the Academy last year.

As one glances over the gallery three large ideal compositions at once arrest his attention; — *Miggles*, by George D. Brush; *Nymph and Tigers*, by A. H. Thayer; and *The Good Samaritan*, by J. Alden Weir. The first of these represents a scene from Bret Harte's well-known story. Mr. Brush is a very young artist, and this work of his, although showing signs here and there of immaturity, is astonishingly promising. Aside from the technical skill and the refinement of feeling displayed, it is pleasant to find a young American artist drawing inspiration from an American subject. The weakest part of the picture is the body of the bear, which might possibly have been painted from a pelt hung on two chairs. Mr. Thayer, whose landscape we have already alluded to, treats his mythological subject in a more fanciful manner, and, to our mind, with considerable more artistic refinement and success. A nymph, attired in the simple drapery of the Golden Age, is sauntering through the woods accompanied by several tigers of a docility to be looked for only in fairy land. The composition is highly poetical and harmonious, and, if not strikingly original, shows a daring in the artist which we are pleased to see. The color, however, lacks force, and the foreshortening of the shoulders of the nymph is defective, thus giving a distorted appearance to the otherwise carefully drawn figure. *The Good Samaritan* is the largest and most ambitious painting in the Exhibition. Mr. Weir, although far from reaching his ideal, has in this composition made a long step in advance of his previously exhibited works, excepting always his portraits, in which he has achieved marked success. The first merit of this picture is the simplicity of design and the courage exhibited by the artist in devoting his attention to masses, sacrificing details for the sake of the general effect. The sympathetic attitude and expression of the good Samaritan are very well represented, and the bust of the young man who has fallen among thieves is also a creditable piece of painting. But the foreshortening of the forearm and the legs is defective, the rock behind the Samaritan evidently shows that it has not been studied from nature, and the arrangement of the light it is difficult to understand.

At the Piano, by Thomas Eakins, is one of the most striking, carefully executed semi-portrait compositions of an artist whose works always command our respect, if they do not enlist our sympathies. His blue-black shadows and backgrounds are not agreeable. In this picture especially the wall looks like rough mortar calcimined, and the occasional flashes of brilliancy which start out of his canvases are so sudden as to convey the impression of unreality. Yet, in spite of such mannerisms, Mr. Eakins is one of our best artists.

Miss Bartol's painting, *Mother and Child*, rather reminds one of the rough sketches which were so prominent in the second exhibition. But it has many excellent qualities which make it evident that it is not the work of a tyro, although it would be preposterous to call it a finished work. The best art is that which achieves its results with the least evidence of mechanism. That finish is not incompatible with breadth and force becomes evident if

one turns to Mr. Weir's *Portrait of a Gentleman* adjoining Miss Bartol's picture, or to Mr. Chase's *Portrait of a Lady*. Neither of these artists can be accused of weakness in *technique*, and yet how admirable the results reached! It is a curious fact, difficult to account for, that many of our lady artists mistake rudeness of treatment for boldness.

Mr. Enneking's *Cattle crossing a Brook* is one of the best paintings in the room, so far as concerns details and execution. But there is a certain monotony in the general effect, which deprives the composition of the interest it might otherwise have. The picture is, however, one of those which improve with repeated inspection.

But whatever praise may be given to the pictures, there is after all nothing better in the exhibition than the sculptures. There certainly never has been executed a bust in this country more truthful and artistic than the classical portrait of Mr. Weir by Olin L. Warner. We have no means of comparing it with works of the Periclean period, as no true portrait busts of that time are in existence, but it certainly is worthy of having a place by the side of Roman sculpture. A portrait of President Woolsey as he appears in the pulpit has also been successfully rendered in marble by St. Gaudens, and respectful attention is claimed by excellent reliefs by Hartley, O'Donovan, and Baur.

Many names have been omitted in this short review which are represented on the walls by works well worthy of attention, and there are a few curiosities also (such as Blakelock's *Morning in Utah*) which ought to have been set down as beyond our power to praise. But limited space has compelled us to confine ourselves to those works which seem best fitted to characterize the tendencies of which the Society of American Artists is the representative. In conclusion, it must be said that this Third Exhibition is inferior in interest to the first; but the merit of that was almost entirely due to foreign influence. It is superior, however, to the second, and although its excellences — which are somewhat heightened by several pictures painted before the Society was founded — are chiefly technical, while complete results are not yet apparent or to be expected at once, it seems to give evidence that the Society of American Artists possesses a vitality which promises to make it a powerful influence in directing American art in the future.

S. G. W. BENJAMIN.

